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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP)
Conference on
"The World's Religions for the World's Children"

Princeton, New Jersey
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Princeton - 25 July 1990

We have gathered here in Princeton to consider the role of organized religions in action on behalf of children - the most vulnerable among us, and yet our great hope for the future. As we just heard in this morning's meditation, children are a great test for adults. The children of today are our tests, as the adults of this generation.

I am honoured to address this gathering of spiritual and religious leaders, convened from the far corners of the earth. There is great symbolism in your joining together here in common purpose, and I must say that, personally, I am deeply moved that it is child-related issues which have drawn you together. More objectively, this is an historic event: the first gathering of world religious leaders convened on the sole topic of children, and the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) is to be commended for this innovation. The WCRP decision to move beyond dialogue among religions toward common action for peace and justice, a decision taken at your 1984 World Assembly and reinforced at the International Council meeting in 1986, was a bold decision, indeed, rhetorically. Can this decision be followed up at a practical level to benefit the children of the world? We should get a clear picture of the answers during these next three days.

What a fitting commemoration of this 20th anniversary year of the WCRP would be made here in Princeton if, in years to come, this conference were looked back upon as a turning point at which leaders set in motion on behalf of children, at a whole new level, those core motivating forces within our societies which spring from deep-seated spiritual and religious conviction.

When the WCRP was founded 20 years ago, Arnold Toynbee was among those who publicly endorsed its formation. Some years before that, Toynbee made another observation which I believe to be quite present for those concerned, as you have declared yourselves, in action for peace and justice. "Our age is the first generation since the dawn of history," he said, "in which mankind dared to believe it practical to make the benefits of civilization available to the

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whole human race". Would it not, in fact, manifest justice to realize Toynbee's dream, and work toward making the benefits of civilization available to all peoples - to, basically, alleviate the worst effects of abject poverty? Would it not require an active mobilization of the forces inherent in peace among peoples to make this happen?

The topic of this conference may well have seemed surprising to some, at first. Why, one might ask, would more than 100 religious and spiritual leaders, representing 12 religions from 40 countries, travel around the world to discuss a topic as mundane as children? Surely societies must, by now, know how to care for children. We have been attending to children since humanity itself was born.

We could ask the same about the world's political leaders. Why will heads of state and government from the far corners of the earth: from North, South, East and West, come together - for the first time - in New York in 67 days from today in order to address an agenda devoted solely to child-related issues? The World Summit for Children, to be held on 29 and 30 September, already promises to be the largest gathering of world leaders in history, with several decisions to participate still under consideration.

The answers to these questions lie, I believe, in a confluence of forces and an historically new set of conditions affecting the children of the world - including a new level of awareness about those conditions and, very importantly, about our capacity to change them.

Among all of the influences affecting children today, perhaps this stark reality best leads us to why there is so much new attention to children: still today, and every day, 40,000 young children will die, and comparable numbers will be crippled or disabled for life from the side-effects of childhood diseases. In the three days of this meeting on "The World's Religions for the World's Children", the death toll of young children will equal the number of lives lost at Hiroshima in World War II. During these three days, however, children will die quietly, away from the lenses of cameras and the fanfare of global attention. They will die in their parents' arms, in the final coma of dehydration; in the extremities of respiratory infections. They will die in the distress of measles and in the long-drawn-out process of frequent ordinary illnesses which steadily weaken and malnourish the body until it has nothing left to fight the next cold, or the next fever, or the next bout of diarrhoea.

No "loud emergency" in history, i.e., no famine, no drought, no flood, has ever killed 280,000 children in a week. Yet that is what a "silent emergency" is now doing - every week.

In the past, child deaths on this scale have been regarded as acceptable because they have been perceived as inevitable. Today, that perception is simply out of date. In our time, advances in knowledge, and in the social organization to put that knowledge to use, have brought the silent emergency out from the cold of the inevitable and into the domain of the largely preventable.

As my colleague in the United Nations system, Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, who is Director-General of the World Health Organization has said:

"We must recognize that most of the world's major health problems and premature deaths are preventable through changes in human behaviour and at low cost. We have the know-how and technology, but they have to be transformed into effective action at the community level. Parents and families, properly supported, could save two thirds of the 14 million children who die every year - if only they were properly informed."

It has been the combination of low-cost/high-impact health knowledge and technology with our revolutionary new capacity to communicate among the poor of the world which has created the capacity for a virtual revolution in child survival and development. The potential is such that leading health experts have concluded, and UNICEF agrees, that child mortality rates can be reduced by one-third during the 1990s. As a dramatic demonstration of this new potential in the 1980s, the lives of millions of children - reaching 3 million in 1989 alone - were saved, and thecrippings of millions more prevented, by nations which mobilized to put today's low-cost child health solutions at the disposal of the majority of families.

While the means are now proven, hundreds of millions of families remain unreached by the potential for a virtual revolution in child survival and development - a breakthrough which, during this last decade of the 20th century, could save some 100 million children from death and disablement, if only one could reach and support them, improve the health and nutrition of many hundreds of millions more, and slow population growth in the process, as parents become confident that their first-born children will survive.

These unprecedented possibilities will become realities, however, if, and only if, the popular and political will manifests to make them happen.

Clearly, it will not be an easy or simplistic task to turn the tide on preventable child death, nor on the injustices and abuses which children suffer. In the relatively straightforward goals of achieving universal child immunization or the widespread use of oral rehydration therapy (ORT) to combat the lethal effects of diarrhoeal dehydration for a few cents per bout, the 1980s have taught us that whole nations must be mobilized, that all factions of a society must participate, including, very importantly, religious structures, in order to transform the possible into reality. But the 1980s have also taught us that it can be done. And success in these clear targets gives confidence that more complex goals can be accomplished - if the will is there.

Indeed, the challenges are formidable. But is it not, ultimately, the belief in what moves mountains - in the forces which expand the parameters of the possible - which distinguishes religious and spiritual groups? And is there not a great power in the awareness of the sacredness of life - a powerful awareness which organized religions serve, within society, to keep alive in our consciousness, and to bring to the fore of our thoughts and actions? The mountains of preventable child deaths and unjustifiable suffering could never be moved by the motivations of money or political gain alone. Yet we know they are moveable. If you cannot move those mountains, who can? Must we wait generations and generations, to see if the scientists, economists and politicians diminish the problems through the general

development process? There is a role in child survival, protection and development which, clearly, can only be executed by those who are in touch with the underlying principles and forces of life on earth - by those who interpret those principles to guide our action in the context of the realities of the day.

In any civilization, morality must march with changing capacity, and ethics with increased awareness. Surely the time has come to say that it is obscene to let preventable child deaths continue with our full cognizance day after day, year after year, as our civilization moves into the 21st century. Surely the time has come to put the mass deaths of children alongside slavery, racism, and apartheid on the shelf reserved for those things which are simply no longer acceptable to humankind. Surely the time has come to mobilize at every level - from village and neighborhood to international - to put known low-cost measures into effect on the necessary scale, to exert the moral muscle to transform what can now be done into what will now be done.

There are many issues beyond child survival which demand our attention here in Princeton, and in our own spheres of influence. Children increasingly fall victim to war; they are abused and exploited. But the stark contrast between what clearly can be done and what is being done is a startling comparison - one that draws our attention to the broader arena of children's issues. Yesterday, and every day in this past week:

- some 7,000 children died from measles, tetanus and diphtheria because they were not immunized with US\$1 worth of vaccines;
- another 7,000 children died because their parents did not know how to apply the simple sugar, salt and water remedy, costing only a few cents, to combat the dehydration from diarrhoea that still is the world's single biggest killer of children;
- another 7,000 children died from respiratory infections because of the lack of early use of US\$1 worth of antibiotics; and
- finally, more than 1,000 children became blind because of lack of 10 cents worth of Vitamin A.

Why is there not more moral outrage at this obscene daily harvest of our youngest and most vulnerable? And why aren't religious movements more active, particularly in those countries where they alone could make a much larger contribution toward alleviating this obscene result?

If we do not translate such readily preventable harm into moral outrage and action when relatively little effort will make such a tremendous life-or-death difference for vast numbers of the world's children, how can we expect a significant response to the far more complex social, civil and economic problems facing children today?

We are here in Princeton, I believe, gathered from the far reaches of the globe, because a new principle is beginning - just beginning - to take hold. The World Summit for Children is also a sign that this principle is taking hold, as is the adoption by the United Nations last November of the Convention

on the Rights of the Child, and the rapid progress toward its ratification by 20 countries - the number required to bring the new international charter into force.

Transcending its detailed provisions, the Convention embodies the fundamental principle that the essentials of child survival, protection and development should have a "first call" on society's concerns and capacities and that children should be able to depend on that commitment in bad times as well as in good, in times of emergency as well as in normal times, in times of war as well as in times of peace, in times of recession as well as in times of prosperity. This principle is the foundation for the arch of protection which could now be constructed over the great majority of the world's children. So important is this that, in UNICEF's view, it should increasingly come to influence the direction and nature of progress in all nations over the next decade and beyond.

At this point I must ask the religious and spiritual leaders gathered here: whose role is it to assert the fundamental principle that children should have a first call on society's resources and concerns? If you do not articulate the universal principles which are emerging into our global consciousness, who will? If you do not act forcefully to protect children from mass harm due to readily preventable causes, who will? The world community looks to you, and rightfully so, for leadership in defining the priority place of children; it looks to you for leadership in insisting that we act in accordance with that guiding principle, and it looks to you for leadership in mobilizing your own faiths to more action for children.

How do we give life to a principle, and usher it from the realm of the ideas into the reality of our interaction? What are the next steps in formulating and acting out of a new ethos for children?

On a very practical level, organized religions have played enough of a role in child survival and development activities to open the door to whole new realms of possibility for social mobilization.

For example, the Catholic Church in El Salvador played a pioneering and courageous role in negotiating a cease fire amidst that country's devastating civil war, to ensure that young children could be immunized. We are most pleased that Archbishop Rivera y Damas, who played a critical role in establishing the life saving "days of tranquility" can be with us at this conference. He did, in fact, accept on behalf of his church, UNICEF's highest award for this effort three years ago. El Salvador this year conducted its fifth successful annual round of vaccinations amidst days of tranquility - days in which war stopped, and the only shots heard were those of the immunization of children.

Similarly, El Azhar has made a major contribution to child survival efforts through its landmark scholarly work identifying passages in the Koran and Sunna which are relevant to children's issues. The results of this work are being felt in all parts of the Islamic world today.

In Sri Lanka, the Sarvodaya movement has mobilized hundreds of thousands into self-help activities consonant with their religious principles.

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of imams and priests from every major religion have played vital roles in reaching the poor with the information and supporting motivation to participate in the universal child immunization effort now saving the lives of more than 6,000 children daily.

In Brazil, particularly in the Northeast, the Catholic Church has been demonstrating its ability to reach those most in need, those most removed from the channels of easy access, with the knowledge, motivation and support to avail themselves of the simple health practices now saving the lives of hundreds of children daily.

We are seeing in country after country how the major religions have the capacity to effectively reach those so often otherwise unreached, particularly the poor and the most vulnerable.

Religious groups in Japan, North America and Europe have found means to translate religious conviction into action by providing tangible support to children in distant countries, and UNICEF has been privileged to be one of the channels for this support.

But perhaps the most exciting aspect of the creative and powerful work of organized religions in support of the survival, protection and development of children is that one cannot help but see that the new door you have come upon is barely jarred open, so much more is possible - if you will build upon the successes already realized.

Gathered in this room is a true power-base of our civilization. Is it not the interpretations of spiritual teachings and the beliefs of people which form the motivating force that directs peoples' - and societies' - action? In reality, organized religions have been at the cutting edge of the evolution of civilization. We have seen this, during my lifetime, in efforts such as those to end colonialism, slavery and apartheid. But along with true power comes a tremendous responsibility. Are you willing to use your power more forcefully on behalf of the children of the world?

It is a sobering realization, indeed, to acknowledge that we in this room represent forces which possess the potential to alter the course of history from simply fulfilling trend lines regarding the lives of our children - trend lines which would measure continued massive preventable child death, and a tragic loss of our civilization's most valuable resource. You - we - have the potential - we have the responsibility - to write an important part of the next chapter in history.

The temporal vision of what you could accomplish by working together - by tapping into the community and even family level advocacy to which you have such unique access - has been laid out in the "goals for children and development in the 1990s" which are attached to the distribution copies of my comments this morning. These goals - goals which would save the lives of some 50 million children and millions of mothers during the decade - can only be achieved, however, with the leadership and support of religious and spiritual organizations insisting that what is do-able for children, gets done.

The World Summit for Children comes at a most opportune time, when the Cold War is finally coming to an end, when freedom of speech, of religion, and

from fear of war are on the advance, and we have a fresh vision of what is possible for our children. We hope this Summit will advance four major objectives:

- 1) To encourage governments and societies to "do the do-able" of mass applicable, low-cost actions for children which are now available;
- 2) To draw attention to major problems affecting children which require more intensive and accelerated attention in other fora (e.g., drugs, AIDS, the environment, debt, war and hostilities, etc.);
- 3) To accelerate ratification and national implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and
- 4) To affirm the need to give a high priority - a "first call" on the resources of society to the most essential needs of children for survival, protection and development, as an indispensable investment in the future of each society.

As we enter the final decade of this millenium we may ask what more precious legacy could be left to the 21st century than the health and well-being of those people who will comprise the societies of the future - that is, the children of today. Perhaps, in fact, there is a greater gift. But it will be given through the same efforts. We will have crafted the gift if the civilization which we are now becoming - which we are molding through our actions - takes for granted that the well-being of children is everyone's concern; if, as a matter of course, we put issues related to children high among our priorities at all levels of society. We will have crafted the gift if our care and nurturing of all children spring naturally from a profound appreciation of the sacredness of life, and of the most dear vulnerability of life as it manifests in the child - it is quite a challenge to adult society, is it not, that total dependence of the child? Such priority, a "first call", will help ensure the well-being of children for generations to come, and it will offer evidence that we are progressing as a more just and humane civilization.

GOALS FOR CHILDREN AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE 1990s

The following goals, formulated through extensive consultation, at country and regional levels and in various international fora including the relevant bodies of the UN (e.g., WHO, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF) and several international meetings including the World Conference on Education for All, attended by virtually all Governments and a large number of non-governmental organizations, are recommended for implementation by all countries where they are applicable, with appropriate adaptation to the specific situation of each country in terms of phasing, standards, priorities and availability of resources. Achievement of these goals is essential to full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the ultimate objective of programmes for children and development.

I. Major Goals for Child Survival, Development and Protection

- Between 1990 and the year 2000, reduction of infant and under-5 child mortality rate in all countries by one-third or to 50 and 70 per 1000 live births respectively, whichever is less.
- Between 1990 and the year 2000, reduction of maternal mortality rate by half.
- Between 1990 and the year 2000, reduction of severe and moderate malnutrition among under-5 children by half.
- Universal access to safe drinking water and to sanitary means of excreta disposal.
- By the year 2000, universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80% of primary school age children.
- Reduction of the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age group to be determined in each country) to at least half its 1990 level with emphasis on female literacy.
- Improved protection of children in especially difficult circumstances.

II. Supporting/Sectoral Goals

1. Women's Health and Education

- Special attention to the health and nutrition of the female child, and pregnant and lactating women.
- Access by all couples to information and services to prevent pregnancies which are too early, too closely spaced, too late or too many.
- Access by all pregnant women to prenatal care, trained attendants during child birth and referral facilities for high risk pregnancies and obstetric emergencies.
- Universal access to primary education with special emphasis for girls, and accelerated literacy programmes for women.

2. Nutrition

- Reduction in severe as well as moderate malnutrition among under-5 children by half of 1990 levels.
- Reduction of the rate of low birth weight (2.5 kg or less) to less than 10%.
- Reduction of iron deficiency anaemia in women by one-third of 1990 levels.
- Virtual elimination of iodine deficiency disorders.
- Virtual elimination of vitamin A deficiency and its consequences, including blindness.
- Empowerment of all women to exclusively breast-feed their child for four to six months and to continue breast-feeding

- Growth promotion and its regular monitoring to be institutionalised in all countries by the end of the 1990s.

- Dissemination of knowledge and supporting services to increase food production to ensure household food security.

3. Child Health

- Global eradication of poliomyelitis by the year 2000.
- Elimination of neonatal tetanus by 1995.
- Reduction by 95 per cent in measles deaths and reduction by 90 per cent of measles cases compared to pre-immunisation levels by 1995, as a major step to the global eradication of measles in the longer run.
- Maintenance of a high level of immunisation coverage (at least 90% of children under one year of age by the year 2000) against diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, measles, poliomyelitis, tuberculosis and against tetanus for women of child bearing age.
- Reduction by 50 per cent in the deaths due to diarrhoea in children under the age of five years; and 25 per cent reduction in the diarrhoea incidence rate.
- Reduction by one-third in the deaths due to acute respiratory infections in children under five years.

4. Water and Sanitation

- Universal access to safe drinking water.
- Universal access to sanitary means of excreta disposal.
- Elimination of guinea-worm disease (dracunculiasis) by the year 2000.

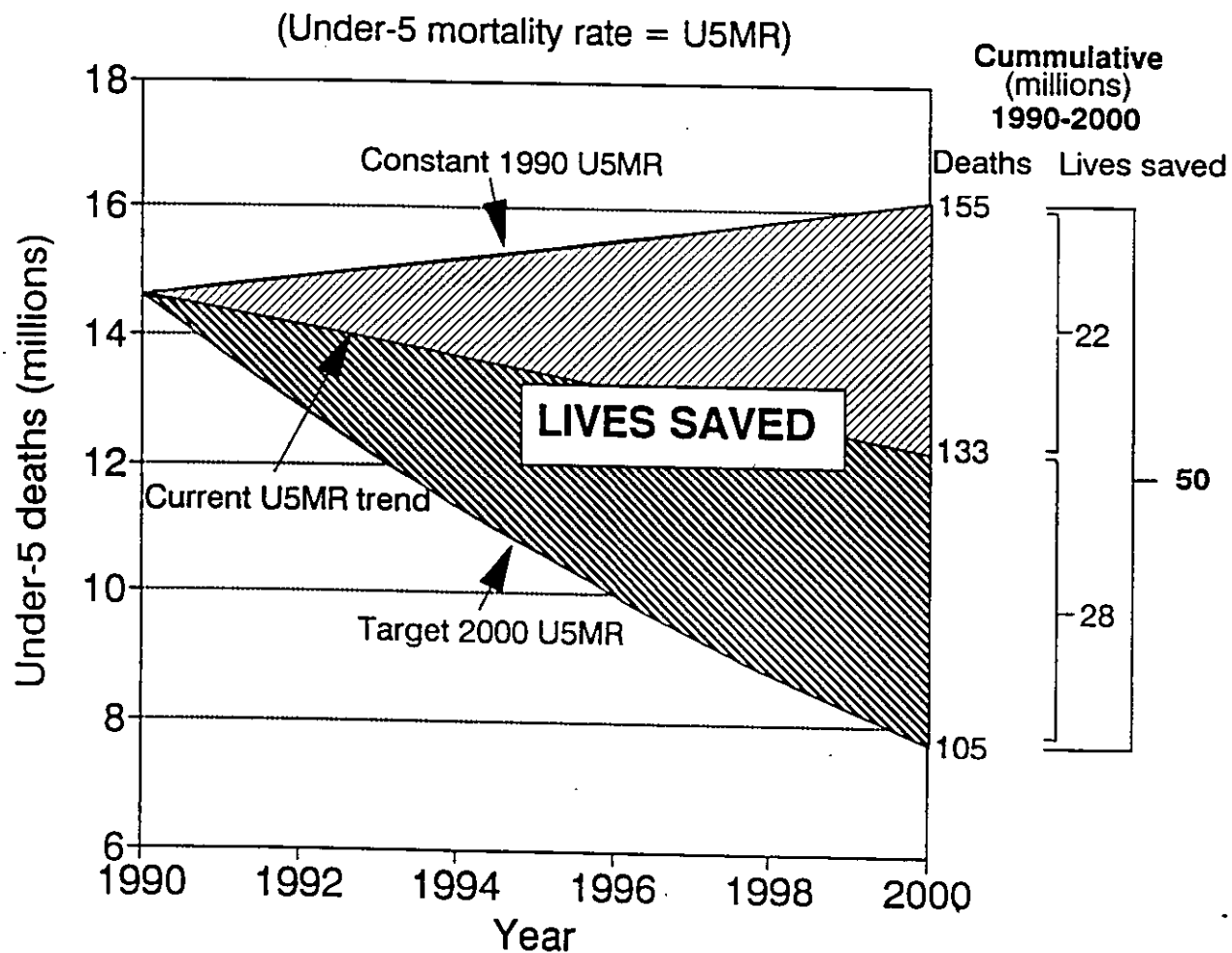
5. Basic Education

- Expansion of early childhood development activities including appropriate low-cost family and community based interventions.
- Universal access to basic education, and achievement of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary school age children through formal schooling or non-formal education of comparable learning standard, with emphasis on reducing the current disparities between boys and girls.
- Reduction of the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age group to be determined in each country) to at least half its 1990 level, with emphasis on female literacy.
- Increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living, made available through all educational channels, including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action, with effectiveness measured in terms of behavioural change.

6. Children in Difficult Circumstances

- Provide improved protection of children in especially difficult circumstances and tackle the root causes leading to such situ-

Saving children's lives in the 1990s



Target 2000 U5MR

Between 1990 and the year 2000, reduction of under-5 mortality rate in all countries by one-third or to 70 per 1,000 live births, whichever is less